

MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



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Black women and feminism

As feminists, most of us white, this issue of Report will leave us uncomfortable. Uneasy. Author and compiler Joy Lovett, who believes in "speaking the truth without equivocation," probably wouldn't mind shaking us loose from any self-righteous anti-male stance we might hold. For as a Black woman, Joy has strong sentiments about what is too often a double stigma in North American society—to be both Black and female.

So when white women ask Joy why Black women are not visible in the feminist movement, she tells them why—in plain language. And that is what Joy has done for us in this issue of *Report*, while also conveying some of the personal pain and oppression she has felt and continues to feel.

Joy begins her essay by laying out in stark terms the hard realities faced by Black women, both today (statistics abound to document this) and historically. She goes on to analyze the failings of the feminist movement vis-a-vis Black women. But she ends on a hopeful note—possible ways in which Black and white feminists might find a common ground. With the interview included in this issue, Joy rounds out her discussion with the remarks and perspective of another Black Mennonite leader.

Professionally, Joy wears two caps. From offices in Elkhart, Ind., she is both associate secretary for Black concerns of the Mennonite Church General Board and executive director of the Afro-American Mennonite Association. For the Mennonite Church General Board, Joy works on behalf of the 67 Black and integrated Mennonite congregations, in coordination and advocacy with various program boards and in educating white Mennonites about the history, culture and sociology of Blacks. And with the Afro-American Mennonite Association, Joy assists the fuller development of Black and integrated congregations and also serves as a catalyst for new church development in Black and integrated communities.

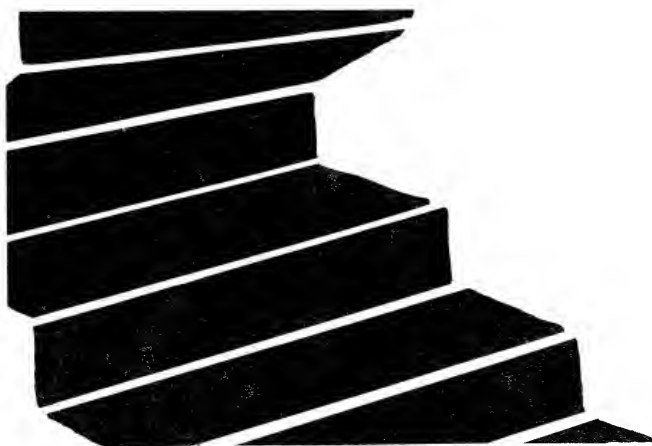
Should this issue of *Report* have its intended effect, Joy urges that we translate any guilt feelings we may have into action. "Cannot guilt," she asks, "be interpreted as a call from the Lord to make changes in lifestyle, make changes in individual behavior patterns, engage in study and reflection, engage in organized activity, or a call to be a conscience to our colleagues, friends and neighbors?"

"No one asks you to take responsibility for what has happened in the past," Joy continues. "You can, however, have an impact on what happens now and in the future."—*the editor*

BLACK WOMEN: A STATE OF THE UNION

By Joy Lovett

Join me on a journey of discovery IF YOU DARE. The road we travel is hazardous, the route complex. The experiences encountered will be painful at times. The course we chart is an exploration of Black womanhood, the relationship between Black and white women and, more specifically, the reasons behind the Black woman's lack of involvement in the women's liberation movement, either within the nation as a whole or the church. These particular questions are being dealt with because these are the ones most often addressed to me by white women.



As we prepare to begin this journey the voice of a mother speaking to her son can be heard in the distance—

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey.
I've still climbin'.
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

—*Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes

The first stop on this journey includes a brief look at the "tacks," "splinters" and "torn-up boards" of the Black woman's existence.

TACKS

An investigation of the relative positions of Blacks, women and Black women in particular will make us a bit uncomfortable and send our minds scurrying for explanations which leave us guiltless. Resist the temptation to blame the victims. This is an oft-used tactic of this society's dominant forces.

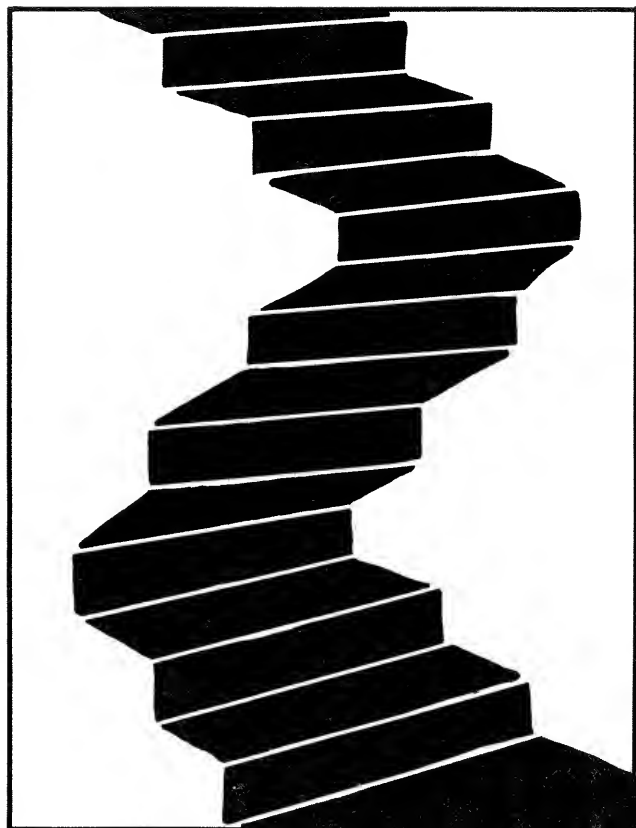
For Black women the issues of race and sex are very much intertwined. It is not always possible to separate the effects of sex and race in considering the relative position of Black women in America. With regard to race:

- The median family income for Blacks (\$12,674) in 1980 was only 58 percent of the median family income of whites (\$21,904). By 1982 this figure had been further reduced to only 55 percent.
- In 1981 30 percent of Black families in the United States lived below the poverty level, as compared to 9 percent of white families.

SPLINTERS

Women, both Black and white, share disadvantages in relation to men:

- Black and white men earn more than women, either Black or white.
- In 1982 women's average income was 63.1 percent of men's average income.
- Women have higher unemployment rates than men.
- The percentage of families with women as heads of



- In 1981 45 percent of Black children under 18 lived below the poverty level, as compared to 15 percent of white children.

● The unemployment rate for Blacks is consistently higher than the rate for whites. Between 1973 and 1984 the rate for Blacks ranged from a low of about 9 percent in 1973 to a high of about 19 percent in 1983. The unemployment rate for whites ranged from a low of about 4 percent in 1973 to a high of 8 percent in 1983.

- During 1984 the gap in unemployment rates for Blacks and whites did not close appreciably. The unemployment rate for whites was about 6 percent while the unemployment rate for Blacks was about 16 percent.

- The unemployment rate for Black teenagers was 43.5 percent in February 1984, as compared to an unemployment rate of 16.5 percent for white teenagers. (statistics taken from the May 11, 1984 issue of *Scholastic Update*)

households increased between 1970 and 1980. However, Black women are more deeply affected than white women by economic and other forces:

- The median family income in 1980 for white males (\$25,319) and Black males (\$17,209) in white-collar positions exceeded that of white females (\$13,035) and of Black females (\$12,969), leaving Black females with the lowest median income. These relative positions

were maintained in all categories of employment (blue collar, service and farm).

- Black women earned 56 cents for every dollar earned by white males and 89 cents for every dollar earned by white women in 1982.

- Access to jobs has improved for both women and Blacks as well as for other minorities. More Blacks and other minorities than women, however, have become physicians, computer specialists, bank officers, bank tellers, sales managers and pharmacists.

- Twenty-six percent of Black women who headed households with children under 18 were unemployed in March 1983, as compared to 13 percent of white women in similar circumstances.

- In 1980 40 percent of Black families were headed by women, as compared to 12 percent of white families.

- In 1981 the median family income for Black female-headed households was \$7,510, as compared to \$12,510 for white female-headed households.

Diana Pearce, in an article entitled "The Feminization of Ghetto Poverty," reported that, "Although the proportion of the poor who are Black did not change during the 1970s, the proportion who were in families headed by women increased. Indeed, the decade of the seventies saw a dramatic shift of the burden of poverty among Blacks from male-headed to female-headed families. The number of Black families in poverty who were maintained by men declined by 35% while the number maintained by women increased by 62%. In

the course of one decade Black female-headed families increased from about one-half to three-fourths of all poor Black families."

The increase in Black female-headed households reflects not only general societal trends of increased rates of divorce and separation but also the fact that Black women are widowed at higher rates than white women and have a higher percentage of births out of wedlock (reported at about 55 percent in "The Feminization of Ghetto Poverty").

In this article Pearce reports that Black women tend to marry or remarry at lower rates than white women and remain single longer prior to marriage. This is, in part, because of a shortage of Black men of marriageable age. For example, the ratio of Black women to men ages 20 to 49 is 1.16, meaning there are sixteen 'extra' Black women for every hundred Black men. The similar ratio for whites is 1.01.

Researchers, including Pearce, identify the causes of this disparity as higher levels of suicide and homicide among Black men and a disproportionately high rate of imprisonment of young Black males. High levels of poverty, underemployment and unemployment contribute to these factors. (Statistics taken from the May 11, 1984 issue of *Scholastic Update* and "The Feminization of Ghetto Poverty." D.M. Pearce, *Society*, November/December 1983)

TORN-UP BOARDS

As bleak a picture as the foregoing statistics might present for the Black woman, the journey does not end here. In order to fully understand Black women's stance in relation to the women's liberation movement, we need to further acquaint ourselves with the spiritual daughters of a Sojourner Truth who once had to bare her breasts at a public rally to prove her womanhood to a white audience.

During the 19th century, persons of a lighter hue viewed Black females as property, as animals without any saving graces. At the same time that myths were perpetrated concerning the absolute purity, sanctity, daintiness and loveliness of the white female, the Black female was painted as tough, lazy, sexually immoral or "loose," dirty. Black women must even yet contend with the degrading images of "Aunt Jemima," "Sapphire" and "Jezebel."

The Aunt Jemima, nanny or mammy stereotype is portrayed as a Black woman who is fat (asexual), wearing a greasy dirty head rag (not clean), with large feet emerging from too-tight shoes. She is passive, loves white folks, is a mother figure who gives without expectation or return. This image continues to be projected in television shows.

The Sapphire stereotype is rooted in the image of womanhood as evil. Sapphire is characterized as "iron-willed, effectual, treacherous toward and contemptible of Black men." Hooks contends, and I know from recent

and continuing experience, that Black females who express bitterness, anger, rage, impatience or intolerance concerning their position are labeled as Sapphire.

As Bell Hooks points out in *Ain't I A Woman*, "With this image white men could justify their dehumanization and sexual exploitation of Black women by arguing that they possessed inherent evil demonic qualities. Black men could claim that they could not get along with Black women because they were so evil. And white women could use the image of the evil sinful Black woman to emphasize their own innocence and purity... Many people have difficulty appreciating Black women as we are because of eagerness to impose an identity upon us based on any number of negative stereotypes."

The Black woman is also seen as being Amazonian, that is, unfeminine and hard-hearted. Because she was and is able to survive in circumstances no "lady" was supposedly capable of enduring, the Black female was characterized as having "animalistic sub-human strength."

In coming to believe the things that whites said about them, Blacks began to blame their problems on one another. Consequently, women were "blamed" for being able to provide food and clothing for their families against all odds. Black males came to believe (and most still do) that a weaker Black woman would mean a more powerful Black male.

The most evil of the myths perpetrated against Black women is that of the Black matriarchy. It has impacted the Black community more than any other. According to this scapegoating view of reality, the Black community, particularly the Black male, is severely damaged by domineering Black females. The dominant female role is supposed to have resulted in the castration of the Black male, juvenile delinquency, self-hatred, low intelligence, cultural deprivation, crimes against persons and schizophrenia among Blacks.

This myth implies that Black females have gained access to privileges denied Black men—primarily employment and education. Both Michele Wallace and Bell Hooks point out that the economic status of Black women fails to support this myth.

The primary culprit, in modern times, in perpetrating this myth is a report written by Daniel P. Moynihan in 1965 entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," (Washington, D.C.; U.S. Department of Labor). Basically, Moynihan's report shifted the responsibility for the plight of Black persons in America from the front door of a white racist male-dominated system to the shoulders of the Black female. Institutional and personal racism were no longer responsible for the disenfranchisement and exclusion of Blacks. Rather, the supposed dominance of the Black female was to blame. She was supposed to have made such great strides in education and employment that she controlled the Black community. The message was that achievement, integration, normalcy for Blacks could not be obtained until the Black woman was subordinated.

Hooks debunks the myth of the Black matriarchy, in part, by outlining the conditions of a matriarchal society as defined by historians and anthropologists and comparing the current situation of the Black woman and the Black community to these conditions. She argues convincingly that a matriarchal society has never and is not likely to exist in the Black community.

Concerning the image of matriarchy, Hooks argues that white male scholars, steeped in the racist views of elite institutions, gave negative meaning to phenomena which benefited both Black males and females. "They chose to see the independence, will power, and initiative of Black women as an attack on the masculinity of Black men," she said. These scholars argued that the active role of the Black woman in the family as mother and provider deprived the Black man of his natural position as patriarch in the home.

Sufficient space does not exist in this report to grapple with the specific misconceptions of the Moynihan document. However, some explanation of the Black woman's role in her community must be made in order to build a few bridges for continued travel. According to Robert Staples in "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," "the Black woman has always occupied a highly esteemed place in Black culture." Family life as known in Africa (patriarchal) was not possible in America: families were split as slaves were bought and

sold; the husband and father was prevented from protecting his wife and children against his white masters and other more favored slaves.

Without doubt Black males were denied the rights and responsibilities of fatherhood. Black slave women were forced to serve the premarital sexual "practice" needs of the white male. Black men, protesting the rape of their wives, were severely punished.

Staples further contends that economics determines the power relationships in a family; that, in fact, patriarchy is based on the woman's economic dependence. The Black female, in the slave family, was independent of the Black male for support as "the cabin was hers and rations of corn and salt pork were issued to her. She cooked the meals, tended the vegetable patch and often raised chickens to supplement the rations. If there was a surplus to sell, the money was hers. She made the clothes and reared the children. If the family received any special favors, it was generally through her efforts."

Discussions of some of the specific allegations contained in the Moynihan report are to be found in *Black Macho* pages 157-167, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy" pages 335-347, and *Ain't I A Woman* pages 71-83.

A part of the matriarchy myth has encompassed the supposed "unnatural" aggressiveness of Black women. Staples suggests that aggressiveness and independence have evolved out of historical experiences and that greater self-reliance has been necessary for survival in a racist society. Rather than being condemned, Black women are to be congratulated for their tenacity since this has been a major factor in the survival of Blacks in America.

Black women have been characterized as exercising more power in the family because they appear to control the decision-making. Staples maintains that "a closer inspection of her decision-making powers often reveals that she does not make decisions counter to her husband's wishes, but renders them because he fails to do so. The reason he defers to her in certain decisions is simply because she is better equipped to make them. Usually she has more formal education and in matters relating to the white society, she knows her way around better. She is more familiar with the machinations of white bureaucracies since contacts with the white world have been more available to Black women than to Black men."

The power of the Black woman is much like American democracy—it is more apparent than real. Power alignments are frequently based on the alternatives the individual has in a situation of conflicting interests. It is where the Black male achieves the upper level of the power dimension. Black females, as previously mentioned, outnumber Black males by a considerable margin particularly in the 18-to-45-year age range. Since the Black woman must compete rather fiercely for the commodities of affection and companionship, she is not in a position to control the Black male.

BUT ALL THE TIME I'VE BEEN A-CLIMBIN ON,

As we move on down the road we stumble over yet another myth—the supposed non-interest of Black females in the women's liberation movement. We pause, completely speechless, at the omissions of white male historians and white feminists. Black women as a whole are not against social equality between the sexes. A 1972 poll of Black and white women, as cited in *Ain't I A Woman*, indicated that more Black women supported equality between the sexes than did white women.

Historians have failed to record the efforts of many of the Black women who attempted to participate in integrated feminist organizations or, if mentioned, acknowledge their work for racial equality but not women's rights. The history books also fail to mention the many Black women's organizations which worked for equality of the sexes as well as racial equality. Recorded history by feminists ignores the discrimination experienced by Black women attempting to work with white organizations.

Both Hooks and Terborg-Penn provide representative listings of Black women involved in the feminist movement during the 19th and early 20th century and their views concerning women's rights. To give just a few examples:

- Sojourner Truth, Black slave and feminist, spoke at anti-slavery rallies and meetings of women suffragists. At the convention of the American Equal Rights Association in 1867 she remarked, "I have lived on through all that has taken place these 40 years in the anti-slavery cause, and I have plead with all the force I had that the day might come that the colored people might own their soul and body. Well the day has come.... We are now trying for liberty that requires no blood—that women shall have their rights. Not rights from you. Give them what belongs to them; they ask it kindly too. I ask it kindly. Now, I want it done very quick."

- After finding a lack of encouragement for the full participation of Black females in the white women's movement, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin worked to organize Black women to deal with the issues themselves. A speaker at the First National Conference of Colored Women held in Boston in 1895, she asserted that, "Our women's movement is a movement that is led and directed by women for the good of women and men."

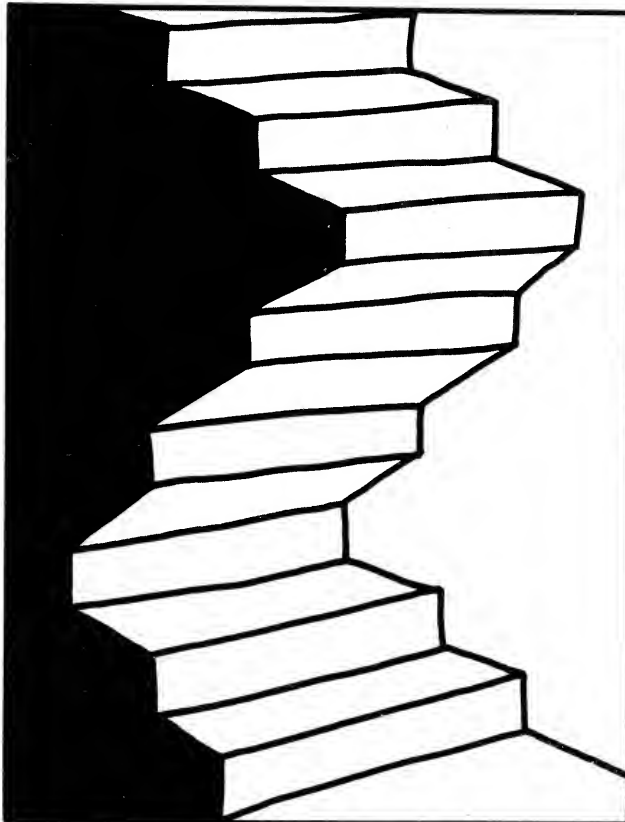
- Black suffragist Fannie Barrier Williams stated at the World Congress of Representative Women her belief in the "power of organized womanhood" and the impact that this could have in reforming society.

Other advocates for women's rights in the 19th and 20th century include Sarah Mapps Douglass, Sarah Forten, Margaretta Forten Purvis, Mary Church Terrell, Victoria Earle Matthews, Anna Julia Cooper and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

Hooks and Terborg-Penn also document the discrimination faced by Black women who attempted to publicly identify with white anti-slavery and women's

rights organizations. The following incidents appear typical:

"In 1903 at the National American Woman's Suffrage Convention held in New Orleans, a southern suffragist urged the enfranchisement of white women on the grounds that it 'would insure immediate and durable white supremacy,'" according to Hooks in *Ain't I A Woman*.



"The issue of whether Black women would be able to participate in the woman's club movement on an equal footing with white women came to a head in Milwaukee at the General Federation of Women's Clubs conference when the question was raised as to whether Black feminist Mary Church Terrell, then president of the National Association of Colored Women, would be allowed to offer greetings, and whether Josephine Ruffin, who represented the Black organization the New Era Club, would be recognized. In both cases white racism carried the day. In an interview in the *Chicago Tribune*, the president of the federation, Mrs. Lowe, was asked to comment on the refusal to acknowledge Black female participants like Josephine Ruffin, and she responded:

'Mrs. Ruffin belongs among her own people. Among them she would be a leader and could do much good but among us she can create nothing but trouble.'

(from *Ain't I A Woman*)

It is Hooks' contention that while most white abolitionists, whether male or female, were very strong in their opposition to slavery, they were totally opposed to granting social equality to Black people. In *Ain't I A Woman*, she cites statements by a number of ardent abolitionists which support white supremacy.

While racial prejudice kept Black women from participating in efforts and institutions organized by white women, there is reason to believe that many if not most of the Black women's organizations were initiated as an outgrowth of a felt need to join with persons who held in common similar life experiences, understandings, problems and needs.

Hooks, in *Ain't I A Woman*, states that the reform measures initiated by white and Black women's groups differed only in that Black women expanded their

efforts to deal with some of the specific problems they faced, including false stereotypes of immorality and sexual exploitation by white "pimps."

It appears to have been much easier to label Blacks as uninterested than to acknowledge that, in the past, Black women have been excluded because of their race and that, in the present, the majority of Black women refuse to join with white women in addressing feminist concerns.

AND SOMETIMES GOIN' IN THE DARK

Given what we now know about the Black woman and her struggle, we are in a somewhat better position to understand her current alienation from the women's rights movement.

Black women have taken a variety of stances, as have all women, in relation to the women's liberation movement. The reasons may differ however. There are Black women who believe that the Black male should take the lead and the Black woman should be subordinate. This view is rooted in an acceptance of the image portrayed by the dominant culture of the "ideal" family and sex roles. It is also rooted in the guilt generated through belief in the myth that her independence and strength have chased the Black male from her home into the arms of white women.

Some Black women have not participated in the movement because they view themselves as already liberated. Unfortunately the white women's liberation movement has been largely publicized as freedom to work, freedom from the kitchen. For Black women, work is not a matter of choice but of necessity. It represents bondage rather than freedom, as well as a denial of the "privilege" enjoyed by white women to stay home and take care of the family.

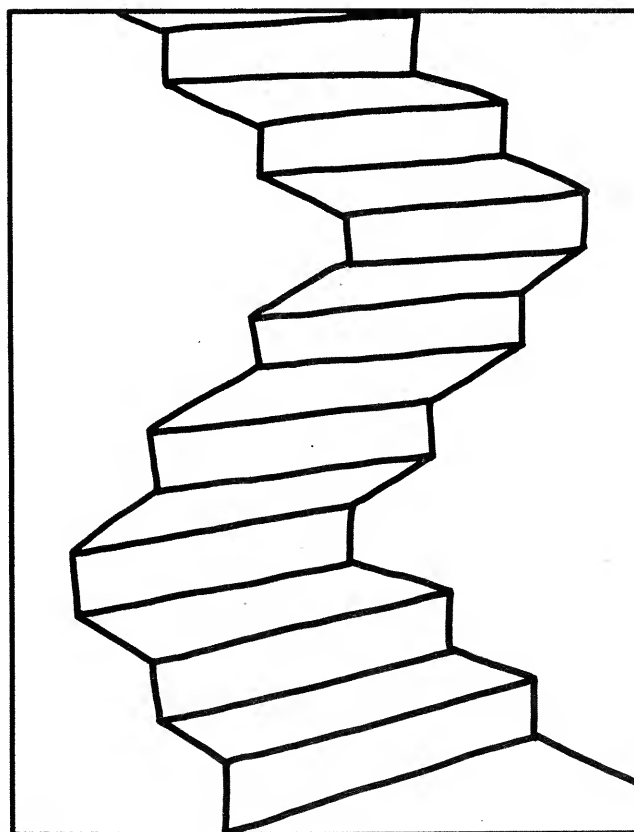
Black women have not joined in the women's liberation movement because it has been perceived as anti-male. While most Black women would like to see changes in male perceptions, attitudes and practices, they are not about to participate in anything which has the least potential to divide Black males and Black females. It is their belief that survival and any chance of improvement hinges upon a joint effort.

Also, identified earlier, the dynamics of power between Black females and Black males are different than those existing between white females and white males. As such, the types of oppression perceived in these relationships differ. Given a different type of relationship, Black women have viewed the responses of white feminists as inappropriate in their context.

Black women have skirted formal participation in the women's liberation movement because to do so would be to drain energy required for the Black liberation movement. Black women have tended to believe themselves more victimized by racism than by sexism and therefore given priority to the struggle for racial equality. This belief is debatable.

Black women have also viewed the women's movement as a deliberate tactic to divide and conquer Blacks. Whether deliberate or not, the movement as currently formulated would have this effect in the Black community.

The movement fails to address the full range of issues important to Black women and fails to grapple with the underlying problems in this society that allow any group to be oppressed. The needs and desires highlighted by the women's movement have tended to be those of middle- and upper-middle-class white women and not those of poor and Black women. Most elements of the white women's movement have not worked for changes in corporate and governmental structures that oppress and exploit ethnic minorities and whole countries but have worked for a share in the existing power structures.



Pauli Murray, in "Minority Women and Feminist Spirituality" reports research by Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis of Hampshire College that indicates that a good portion of the concerns being addressed by white women does impact upon all women, such as contraception, abortion, forced sterilization, rape, wife battering, inequities in law, health care, welfare, work conditions and pay. The manner in which they have been addressed, however, has made them appear unrelated to Black women's needs.

Black women have been angered by the way in which white feminists have constantly compared their plight to that of Blacks, particularly Black males, failing to acknowledge the existence of Black females. A typical response is that of Linda LaRue, as quoted in *Ain't I A Woman*:

"Let it be stated unequivocally that the American white woman has had a better opportunity to live a free and fulfilling life, both mentally and physically, than any other group in the United States, excluding her white husband. Thus any attempt to analogize Black oppression with the plight of American white women has all the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the rope-burned hands of an amateur mountain climber."

Hooks critiques the women's movement for perpetrating the myth that all women's social status in the United States is on a par. Hooks argues, and socioeconomic data support the argument, that white women's status has never been comparable to that of Black women. Further she states, "Although they were both

subject to sexist victimization, as victims of racism Black women were subjected to oppressions no white woman was forced to endure. In fact, white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to Black women and Black men."

One of the largest obstacles to collaboration between white and Black women is white women's failure to acknowledge and deal with their own racism towards Blacks. As Black women have experienced life in America, they have not been able to discern a difference in the racism expressed by white males and white females. White females have been instrumental in oppressing Black females both socially and economically. There is even some evidence that, on an individual basis, white males may be more tolerant than white females because their status is less threatened. White feminists have consistently refused to address this issue. Pauli Murray quotes a statement by Dr. Deborah Hines that sums up the opinion of many Black women:

"Black women find it extremely difficult to ally themselves with those who have not been part of the solution, but a part of the problem. Black women find it extremely difficult to ally themselves with those who say, 'we have all suffered the same,' when we know it isn't so. Black women find the situation intolerable when we are told (by white women) that we should do in our struggle, and not asked what we want to do. Until our step-sisters stop superimposing their needs onto us, we have nothing to say to them."

WHERE THERE AIN'T NO LIGHT

Nearing the end of our journey we are somewhat paralyzed by the enormity of the task of attempting any kind of unified effort, skeptical of our ability to deal with or overcome any one of the obstacles that lie before us and not quite sure whether or not we want to carry our intellectual exploration to the point of physical action. The task, as I perceive it, involves creating a coalition of individuals (male, female, Black, white) across the church which is characterized by:

1. A commitment to *human* rights. As a Black minister stated recently, the same types of scriptural arguments used to argue that women are not fit or should not engage in ministry are the same arguments which are used to say that he, as a Black man, is not competent to engage in certain occupations or leadership activities;

2. A commitment to action, individually and corporately, which both gives witness to our religious convictions and responds to a particular problem or need in a way which is redemptive for all involved. For example, I would presume that the majority of Mennonites, in this effort, unlike those in the larger feminist context, would not favor abortion. (I have no documentation for this other than the sentiments occasionally expressed in the *Gospel Herald*.) No substantive

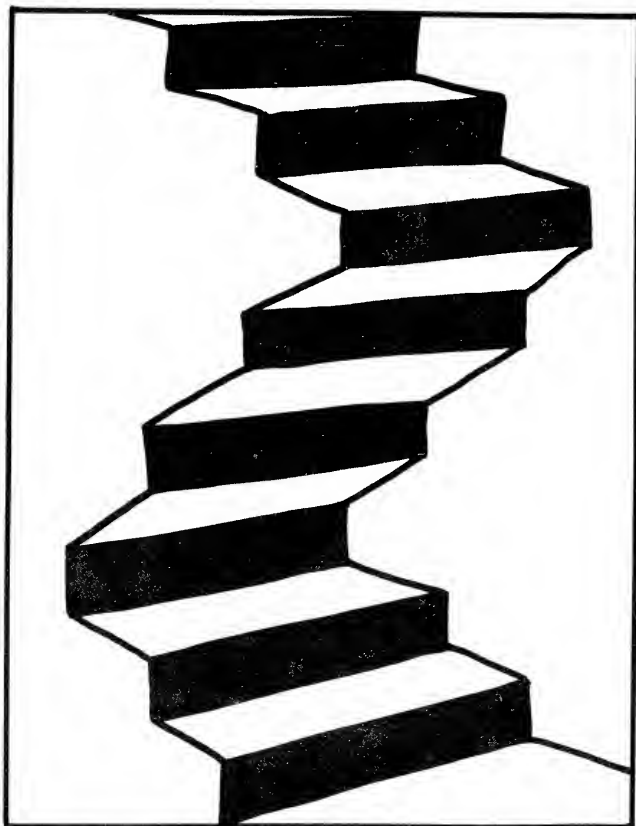
efforts, however, have been made to provide counseling services for those needing to make such decisions or to provide support services if the girl/woman decides to have the baby. Those efforts that have been made have tended to target those least in need or with the greatest access to resources.

The larger feminist movement has failed to address the full spectrum of problems facing women of all classes and races as well the underlying organization and values of a system which allows for oppression. Are we fundamentally committed to the status quo, simply wanting a share of the power base (representation on various decision-making boards and committees, decision-making administrative positions on agency staffs, pastorates) where, when entry is gained, we continue business as usual? Or are we committed to working for changes in the values and directions which currently allow us not only to neglect and oppress but also to exclude? If we are only concerned with the former then there is not much possibility that Blacks will be engaged.

Considering the rate at which most of our communities are deteriorating Blacks are not going to be willing to expend energy in activities which do not impinge upon these difficulties. There is little evidence of

commitment among white feminists to the development of Black communities. There is much sympathy but only small amounts of active support. The response has generally been, "We believe in what you're doing but we simply do not have a structure to address this area of need. Have you tried . . . ?" or "What you're saying really makes sense but we simply don't do things that way." I would like to believe that this situation is changing, or at least has possibilities for change.

Support must be visible in order to be believed. For Blacks, the support of white sisters has been highly invisible. To give a few examples of what I mean . . . Traveling in France this past summer I experienced racial prejudice of a kind I have not known since my early years in the south. On a train traveling from Bulogne to Paris we were refused service (refreshments) until all the whites in the car were served. The white American woman who was sitting behind us and next to be served offered not one word of protest after I had informed the attendant of his omission. On a tour bus in Paris I was asked to vacate my seat so that a white American sister, who was last to board the bus



and had paid no more than I had (unless in bribes) could have the seating of her choice. Two white American sisters sitting directly behind us spoke of the incident between themselves, one saying that she thought the action unjust and the other taking the opposite view. Regardless of their private thinking, no white American sister protested the tour guide's action.

When I have had occasion to describe this treatment to white American Mennonite sisters, the first response has not been to express horror that such a thing could

happen but to question my understanding of the events and to subtly suggest that my perception must be off since they have not heard of such things happening from other sources. Such a response leads me to a third requisite for a collaborative effort.

3. Committed to acknowledging and dealing with our own racist tendencies as well as those of others. The motivation for much unjust behavior is not limited to racism in most instances but may include egotism, fear, the desire to acquire and maintain power and control, sexism, jealousy, etc. None of us, no matter how wronged, are free of the enemy. All of these motivations or ills must be named and systematically addressed. To pretend that racism does not exist because we are tired of hearing about it or because somebody told us that all the problems were solved 10 years ago is to give up all possibility of a collaborative effort.

4. A willingness to acknowledge that the level of oppression experienced by Blacks is not comparable to that of white women and that the status of white women is not representative of the status of minority women.

5. A willingness on the part of whites to assume the initiative in developing any kind of collaborative effort. For many Blacks there is little belief in the integrity of whites, particularly those in the church, after the experiences of the last 20 years.

The entire problem becomes more complicated as we attempt to place the issues outlined above in the context of the Mennonite church. Inequities within the Mennonite framework are more difficult to address because of the general belief that current attitudes and practices have been grounded appropriately in scripture and because of the unwillingness of Mennonites, both male and female, to engage in direct confrontation. For example, the issue of women in pastoral ministry (which is still quite controversial) was side-stepped at two major churchwide meetings called specifically for the purpose of dealing with the differences among us—Conversations on Faith sponsored by the Mennonite Church General Board at Laurelville and the Conference on Leadership Polity sponsored by the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries in Ohio.

A further complicating factor is the attitude of the Black woman within the Mennonite Church. Although there are exceptions, the church has been the one area where the Black female has not challenged the male's belief that leadership is his sole prerogative. Feeling that the Black church has been the one place where the Black man could function with all the "rights and privileges" expected of males in this society, Black females have tended to leave this arena alone. This does vary somewhat from denomination to denomination.

Within the Black Mennonite Church, even more so than the larger Black church, there have been so few Black males that there has been no shortage of opportunity for women to minister. The perception of the needs, problems, etc. will therefore tend to vary. While not many Black Mennonite congregations are willing to accept a woman as a pastor, not many Black

Mennonite women who have felt a call to minister have identified that call in terms of the pastorate.

A third complicating factor is the socioeconomic status of most Black women within the Mennonite church. When whites began planting churches in Black communities they went, without exception, to the poorest of the poor. These communities have not changed. There is simply no time or energy left over from the daily struggle to make ends meet to devote to much of anything outside of the local church. The expenditure of additional energy is generally related to the alleviation of immediate problems or needs.

To conclude our travels we need to move from a consideration of the theoretical or merely informational to the personal and the practical. On this level, the first question that I, as a Black woman ask is, "Are we serious about the business?"

By this I mean: Has anyone of an Anabaptist theological persuasion attempted to develop and introduce into our congregations Sunday School materials for our youth that encourage, train and instill appropriate understandings of sex roles? Have Sunday School materials been developed which provide an Anabaptist theological base for our youth in dealing with problems and situations faced by our urban youth as opposed to doctrinal and issue-oriented material? Has anyone taken seriously the need for materials for both youth and adult which address the issues of personal and institutional racism? These represent only a few areas which require action. The list could go on for pages.

The second question I ask myself is what are the parameters or realistic possibilities of a collaborative effort? In view of all that I have outlined in these pages, it is clear to me that collaboration must be oriented to specific areas of need held in common between Black and white women.

These would include such things as day care, health and medical care, rape, wife abuse. There are many other possibilities. However, care must be taken to address these concerns from a perspective which is relevant to Blacks. For example, in the arena of medical care, feminist literature has tended to concentrate on such things as the unjustifiably high rates of hysterectomies and Cesarean sections and the erroneous automatic assumptions doctors make in treating female patients whereas Black women who are poor have trouble gaining access to medical care at all. A particular tragedy of the Reagan years is the declining access to prenatal care and nutritional supplements. There has been a rise in the non-white maternal and infant death rates, which has not occasioned public comments or activity from feminists. There are infinite possibilities for collaboration in dealing with the stresses and strains of everyday life—insufficient food, clothing and shelter for the poor and the elderly, etc.

There is little possibility of collaboration in areas which would have the potential of challenging the leadership position of the Black male in the church.

Tacks, splinters and torn-up boards have been a too real part of the Black woman's staircase in North America. But the Black woman has continued her upward climb, despite historical discrimination by both white men and white women. Lately, she's grown weary of the feminist movement's effort to recruit her energies, while failing to deal with its racism and to address many of the issues vital to her, as a Black. Collaboration between Black and white women still is possible, however, if white women will now take tools and sandpaper in hand and work towards refurbishing that erstwhile rickety staircase.

FOR I'SE STILL GOIN', HONEY.

I'SE STILL CLIMBIN'.

AND LIFE FOR ME AIN'T

BEEN NO CRYSTAL STAIR.

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A Second Opinion

Black women within the Mennonite church are very much involved, at both the local and churchwide level, in various forms of ministry. To conclude her discussion of black women and feminism, Joy has interviewed one of these women. Wilma Bailey is director of the James Lark Leadership Education Program (Urban and Black Ministry) at Goshen College. She is a graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, single, a frequent speaker at conference and churchwide functions, and a member of several church-related boards and committees.

Joy: What is your view of the women's liberation movement?

Wilma: Well, I think the current women's movement is being basically elitist. Of course I am aware of Black women, not very many, who have been involved in the women's movement. Many of these are well removed from the Black community, tending to be people who are highly educated and on the edges of the power structure they would like to become a part of. I do not feel that the movement addresses the concerns and needs of the poor women and Black women and other minority women who are in this country.

Joy: What is your view of the feminist effort within the Mennonite Church?

Wilma: Well, I think the feminist effort within the church has been helpful to a certain group of people. More and more women are being considered for professional positions or committee work or whatever. More and more you hear people specifically requesting, or men are suggesting that we need to have a woman on this or that. In terms of women in the church, particularly serving in a ministry of some kind or other, I think they have been helpful too. I think that this is the work of the feminists who have been quite vocal.

Now, I think that on the negative side, because they have been in some cases quite vocal, they have made people afraid of women; afraid that they want to come and take over and push other people around or something. I think there is some kind of a fear there now which has hurt the movement. Many of the women I know who are interested in pastoral ministry and who have a pastoral heart are those who are actually quite conservative in their theology. They simply want to serve. They have always been in the church. They feel a call to the ministry and they'd like to serve but people are afraid they are going to be a women's liber— and that's all they are going to preach about and that's all they are going to be concerned about.

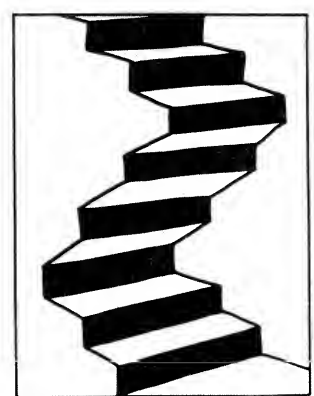
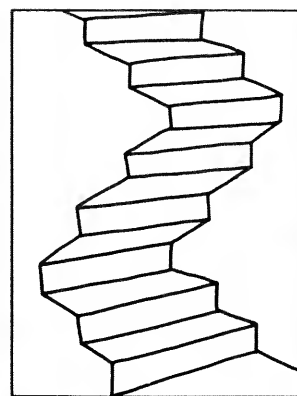
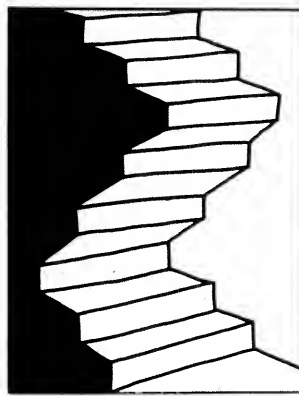
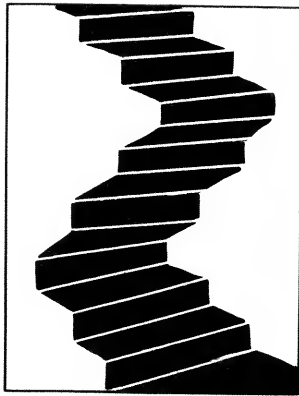
So I think there has been a backlash to the efforts of vocal feminists. I do think, though, that their being so vocal has helped others to start thinking about using women in various roles.

Joy: Do you view the idea of a coalition between Black women and white women as valuable or necessary?

Wilma: Well, I am not sure for what reason there would be a coalition of Black and white women in the church. I think that the only way it would work is if everyone's concerns would be taken into consideration. The poor and the rich, the ones who are not in the mainstream of the church, as well as those who are our city, our urban women and also the suburban and rural small-town women. I just don't see that happening because the church, of course, is a reflection of society in general. Our Mennonites have proven to be that.

The structures need to change in order for them to be sensitive to the concerns of everybody. I think if we simply become a part of the structure then we will not change anything and we will be hurting ourselves or we will be hurting some other group of oppressed people even within the church. I don't quite see what a coalition really would do. I see Black and white women at such different points in the Mennonite church, perhaps even more so than in society.

It's the racism, too. Typically, white Mennonites are pretty well off. They are soundly in the middle class and their minds are adjusted to a whole different place. They've got all that prejudice that they won't deal with. Because the Black churches and integrated churches they set up were primarily in the cities, many are in very low-income areas. There is therefore a wide gap. They don't seem to be willing to come over to the Black side of things. In the past what has happened when they want to form coalitions is that the Blacks come over to them and support them and what they want to accomplish. I don't see that happening.



Letters

I have been a reader of *Report* for about four years and have appreciated the many women who are willing to share their life experiences in it. It seems to me that it is the shared life experiences that are most important in helping people understand what the struggles of women are all about.

I have been a first woman Christian Education Director in my home church for five years. It has brought with it many struggles and often I have been helped and affirmed by the articles in *Report*.

—Helen Unrau, Altona, Man.

News and Verbs

Sara Stambaugh's first novel, *I Hear the Reaper's Song*, is winning critical acclaim from such newspapers as *The Washington Post* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The University of Alberta English professor's work is published by Good Books of Intercourse, Pa.

Lois Barrett, who serves as "mentor" to the congregation of Mennonite Church of the Servant in Wichita, Kan., was ordained to the ministry there on Jan. 20. Lois, former associate editor of *The Mennonite* and former director of General Conference News Service, has authored *The Vision and the Reality*, a history of home mission published by Faith and Life Press in 1983.

Christine Wenger was licensed as a pastoral team member at Pittsburgh (Pa.) Mennonite Church on Nov. 18.

Gail Gnagy was licensed as youth pastor of Carpenter Park Mennonite Church in Hollsopple, Pa. on Nov. 11.

Dorothy A. Friesen, recently returned from two months in the Philippines, is currently writing and speaking on U.S.-Philippine connections on behalf of Synapses, an organization concerned with making links between people of the economically developing and developed nations. For more information, contact Synapses, 1821 West Cullerton, Chicago, Ill. 60608.

In our society women are penalized for being the bearers and nurturers of children. What a joy, therefore, to read in your issue on the feminization of poverty (September/October 1984) that the report of the Peace and Social Concerns Commission of the Canadian Conference of the Brethren in Christ recommended that the church INFLUENCE LAWMAKERS TO SUPPORT SOCIAL SERVICES FUNDING.

Congratulations to the committee, the conference and *Report* for bringing us that good news at Christmas.

—Donna Stewart, North Vancouver, B.C., Regional representative, National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

Marj and Bill Stucky were installed as pastoral leaders of the Ft. Collins (Colo.) Mennonite Fellowship on Jan. 13. The couple served previously for 10 years as co-directors of Camp Mennosach in Murdock, Kan.

Martha Willems of Hillsboro, Kan. is serving as a visiting professor at the University of Kinshasa in Zaire and she also teaches library science at Kinshasa Superior Theological Institute, a school supported by the Mennonite Brethren and other churches.

Ruby Rhoades died on Jan. 8 in Elgin, Ill. Ruby served as associate general secretary for world ministries of the Church of the Brethren, the first woman to attain her level of leadership in that denomination. She devoted her entire life to the global issues of peace and justice and was particularly concerned with those who suffer due to the ravages of war.

"Women Creating Wealth: Transforming Economic Development" is the theme of the 1985 Association for Women in Development conference to be held April 25-27 in Washington, D.C. Sessions will explore the relationship between human, natural and capital resources and the ways in which they can be harnessed to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women. For more information, write to AWID, NASULGC, Suite 710, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Eva Vascas and **Ester Hinojosa** will coordinate the next Mennonite Hispanic Women's Conference to be held in 1986 in either Hesston, Kan. or Chicago, Ill. Eva attends Lawndale Mennonite Church in Chicago and Ester lives in Brownsville, Texas, where she participates in the congregation of Church of the Lamb.

February 3 proved a significant day for Colorado's three Mennonite women ministers. That morning **Susan Ortman Goering** was licensed as co-pastor of Arvada (GC) Mennonite Church. In the afternoon, **Patricia Shelley**, associate pastor of First Mennonite Church in Denver, was ordained jointly by the MC and GC conferences of that area. And in the evening, **Marilyn Miller** helped the congregation she pastors, Boulder Mennonite Fellowship, celebrate the opening of its new worship and community center.

Susan is completing her masters of divinity degree at Iliff School of Theology. Patricia is a doctoral candidate at the University of Denver/Iliff School of Theology and will begin teaching at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan. beginning in September. Marilyn is one of the few Mennonite women to be the sole leader of her congregation. She formerly co-pastored Arvada Mennonite Church.

Jean Janzen, a poet from Fresno, Calif., recently had a book of poetry, *Words For the Silence*, published by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies. Jean's sensitive treatment of her history and experience has moved many who have read and heard her work.

Esther K. Augsburg of Washington, D.C., an artist, author, lecturer and teacher, has recently had a catalog of her work published. Featured are sculptures such as "Job," "The Prodigal" and her award-winning "Pel-vone." Esther, whose work is exhibited internationally, holds an honorary doctorate from James Madison University in Virginia.

Hoping to reach out to greater numbers of Mennonites who share our belief that Jesus Christ's teachings show no discrimination between men and women, the Committee on Women's Concerns is looking for readers willing to help us distribute copies of the March/April issue of *Report* to church sisters and brothers. If you would be willing to serve as a church contact to receive and distribute extra copies of the next *Report*, please send your name, address and number of copies desired to Emily Will, MCC, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, Pa. 17501.

Elizabeth A. Schroeder of Reedley, Calif., a Mennonite Brethren and a retired public school teacher, is serving on the Republican National Committee of the Republican party. She's been listed in several editions of *Who's Who of American Women* and *Who's Who in the West*.

Teachers of peacemaking, from early childhood to adult, may be interested in attending one of three week-long institutes on peace education, scheduled for three different locations this July. The institutes are slated from July 7-13 in Edmonton, Alberta; from July 14-20 in Irvine, Calif.; and from July 28-Aug. 3 in the Bronx, N.Y. For information or registration forms, write to Peace Education, Box 171, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 10027.

Looking Ahead

Forthcoming *Reports* will focus on:

March-April 1985

May-June 1985

July-August 1985

Women and Plurality

Women and the Special Child

Moral and Faith Development

REPORT is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Emily Will at MCC, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501.

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